



A Locally-Owned and Independent Voice in the City



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Gamer's Paradise

The streets of L.A. are the setting for dozens of video games that stage dangerous drag races and grisly shooting sprees in your favorite neighborhoods.

Is our city destined to be remembered for its game-cred?

By John Baldrica



In the landscape of fantasy, it's safe to say that the real city of Los Angeles — despite all of its real-world size and complexity — pales in comparison to its acreage in the public consciousness. This L.A. of the Mind is both a character and a setting, the magic menagerie in which cultures around the world have watched a thousand stories play out. And, as no two stories are the same, neither are any two imagined L.A.s.

It's not exactly as if the city has a split personality — more as though it's unaware of the impressions it has made at other times, like the friend who conveniently forgets about the night he got drunk and hit on your mom. At one end is the gimp-and-gangland milieu of "Pulp Fiction." At the other is the "Muppet Movie's" sweet, archetypical end of the rainbow. And, as the regular political brouhaha over some recent film or other inevitably shows, there are plenty of people in the world (most of whom have never been to our town) that are ready to believe both extremes — and to judge L.A. accordingly.

But these communal perceptions have, until now, at least been filtered through a writer or director's particular vision, the audience only asked to absorb the story, never to participate. Now, for good or bad, the technologies of electronic games promise to allow the rest of the world — and even those of us living here — a visceral experience of the character and culture of our city that film, television, or even real life could never approach. With local pastimes and personalities making cameo appearances and some games recreating hundreds of L.A. landmarks — from the Santa Monica Pier to Staples Center — our town is poised as a prime destination for thrills, chills, subculture voyeurism, and digital mayhem of today's video games.

My Own Private Sig Alert

Part of the credit for this recent trend is that computing power has finally evolved enough to allow the faithful recreation of one of our town's most recognizable features: urban sprawl. This development is fitting, because the frustration of a traffic jam on the 405 Freeway is already a tableau for plenty of imaginary drama. One may occasionally notice the drivers behind them oscillating their index fingers above their steering wheel like the twin barrels of a machine gun. Particularly if one drives a Hummer. In any case, the people making games are smart enough to know that: 1) L.A. is a car town, and 2) This fantasy is not an isolated one. And, as such, game designers are doing their best to make sure that your fellow road warriors have an option for addressing such fantasies that does not involve strapping chain-guns to their hoods, and so are in truth performing a vital public service.

So it's no surprise that, of the upcoming games set in L.A., a great number are so called "racers," putting you behind the wheel of virtual vehicles — many of them real-world replicas themselves. Some of these games, such as "The Fast and The Furious" and "The Italian Job" are based on successful L.A.-centric films; the games allow players to experience and expand on their favorite celluloid moments (and, really, who doesn't want a chance to crash Vin Diesel into a freight train?)

Others, like the acclaimed "Midnight Club II," just let gamers treat the city as a private playground where Caltrans guidelines can be mocked with impunity, from ripping the wrong way up the California Incline to outracing punks on the runways of LAX.

Others have incorporated the unique quirks of local car culture, both to appeal to the large crossover auto and videogame market in L.A. as well as to give the hip kids in Des Moines something to aspire to. One example of a local trend in the spotlight: car tuners — the young, largely Asian and Southern California subculture obsessed with upgrading the performance and flash of inexpensive, small cars (like Toyota's currently California-exclusive Scion brand, which offers neon-glowing cup-holders as a dealer option.) Several upcoming games give players the ability to build and customize their own virtual rides, including simulated auto parts from real companies. In addition, the soon-to-be-released "Gran Turismo 4," which Charles Graeber profiled in a recent WIRED magazine article, will include so-called "drifting" competitions — precision driving events featuring synchronized skidding that are popular with the L.A. tuner crowd. These drifting competitions will get what amounts to their first real national exposure by way of a video game, an unprecedented event Graeber predicts might let the "sport" achieve the mainstream success of skateboarding.

But it's "Street Racing Syndicate" that's most likely to make soccer moms in Iowa think we Angelinos are seriously out to lunch. Based on the truism that a hot-rod is only as good looking as the lady in the passenger seat, in this upcoming illegal-street-racing game the affection of lovely racing groupies is as important to your street cred as is your skill behind the wheel. You can upgrade not only the quality of your car but also the quality of your ladies by impressing them with big wins. But it will take more than just speed to keep them; you may literally have to choose between entering a race and taking your high-maintenance virtual girlfriend out for martinis. You can also up the stakes, however, by betting her on the race outcome, along with your pink slip, a feature that will likely endear the game to feminists everywhere.

Of course—in keeping with another unofficial L.A. pastime — if a street race gets busted, players can lead the 5-0 across town in an impromptu high-speed chase.



O'er the Rampart District We Hailed

For those civic minded few who would prefer to be the chase-er than the chase-ee, a slew of games let players don the blue polyester of the LAPD, giving gamers the chance to reign in the chaos instead of causing it. Or, even better, to do both at once.

For those who feel that Colin Farrel has as much tactical sense as a Leprechaun with a

shotgun, "SWAT 3: Close Quarters Battle" lets players join the ranks of the department's most bullet-chompingly macho group and take aim at the bad guys themselves. The game also boasts the pedigree (or — depending on your point of view — the horrible, horrible curse) of being developed in conjunction with former LAPD Chief Daryl "Let-It-Burn" Gates. Thanks to Gates, the game incorporates actual LAPD SWAT tactics, equipment, even personnel — and also some handy guidelines about joining the force for real. Nothing like a little free advertising.

Released before 9/11 but still widely available, the game boasts a weird prescience, with terrorists taking control of the tower at LAX and the floor of the Convention Center. Building on that theme, the upcoming "SWAT: Global Strike Team" —taking an apparent cue from current foreign policy — lets players go yippe-kai-yay on the whole planet, from foiling an L.A. bank heist to rubbing some 100 percent American Lead Pepper into the eyes of dictators everywhere.

But, of course, when much of the nation thinks of the LAPD, they don't just think cops. They think corrupt cops. Call it the Bloody Glove Syndrome. And fueling that collective delirium is the upcoming "True Crime: Streets of L.A.," which, for good or ill, has the potential to be one of the most successful and sprawling visions of Los Angeles to make it into a game this year.

Echoing the open-ended structure of the hugely popular "Grand Theft Auto" games, you'll follow Nick Kang, angry cop and kung-fu master, who has a regular habit of going medieval on his suspects. In most towns, that would land him on doughnut patrol, but in L.A., Kang instead ends up as part of the secret Elite Operations Division, where his trouble respecting fourth amendment rights becomes a professional asset.

As in the GTA games, you'll have the option of stealing anyone's vehicle and speeding in any direction in search of mayhem (and, after the recent election, there's a certain appeal to carjacking anyone driving a Hummer.) But what sets this apart is that over 250 square miles of a real city are recreated with GPS precision — complete with streets, landmarks, even shopping malls modeled in their correct locations.

When I played an early version of the game at this May's huge Electronic Entertainment Expo ("E3" to geeks in the know), I did what the booth representative there acknowledged "everybody from L.A. does" — I raced my hijacked wheels to my virtual home, experiencing an almost voyeuristic tingle as each real-named intersection sped by. In the game, my apartment was now a liquor store. Between a pair of strip joints. While this was, admittedly, a contingency that I had long prayed for, it was also strangely jarring — especially with the hoity Beverly Center perfectly re-created just down the street. More intimate than the simple buzz of recognition we all enjoy when spotting a glimpse of our city in a film, the experience was most akin to visiting a scrambled dreamscape, the kind where you are wandering the exact house you grew up in, but your father has been replaced by a talking trout.

And it is an addled reality that will soon be exported and could be shared by millions. It won't be doing a lot to clear up the House-of-Crackpots image that California has been earning of late, either. In a recent interview at HomeLAN, an online gamers site, "True Crime" producer Bryant Bustamante promised that you'll be able to "ogle the surgically-enhanced hotties down in Beverly Hills" and put the smack on some "baddass Russian Mafiosos and Chinese Triad thugs." No word on surgically-enhanced hottie Mafiosos, though presumably this version of L.A. must have a few of those as well. The developer also assured that "when you are walking the streets of L.A. you might run into pimps, hookers, movie stars, kung-fu grandmas, angry bums, you name it," and reminded us that "It's L.A. man!"

Now, certainly kung-fu grandmas may call forth a lot of associations in our fellow American's heads — notably an overpowering scent of Ben Gay — but an indigenouness to L.A. probably isn't the first. This game may well change that, affording it the dubious accomplishment of instilling a brand new, whacked-out stereotype about a city that already has well more than its share. And, adding to the blurred line between the virtual setting and the real city, the developers plan to pepper the game with recreations of historic L.A. crime spectacles such as the North Hollywood bank shootout or the infamous white Bronco chase.



To Live and Die in LA:

All of this brings up a point: will actually experiencing rogue cops and ninja octogenarians and kamikaze, nitrous-oxide equipped Honda Civics make people think that this is what L.A. is really all about? After all, the Marines have used the game "Doom" to prepare their troops for the confusion of close-quarters battle. Are we sending out the message that if you want to make it here, these games are your playbook?

Francis Steen is an associate professor of Speech and Communication Studies at UCLA, where the intersection of culture and games is a burgeoning topic, prompting a recent conference on "Playing, Gaming, and Learning," co-organized with UCLA Extension's Department of Computer Graphics and Graphic Design. Steen's work analyzes the kind of survival lessons learned through the simulations of "play" behavior, such as the surprisingly common (and gruesome) game parents play when tickling and pretending to devour their young children. Such play simulations, he argues, are ideal for rehearsing "high-stakes interactions," the kind of saber-toothed-tiger-in-the-nursery moments for which ancestral children got only one chance at the correct response. The same ability to replay life-and-death decisions is what makes military war-gaming useful as well.

In other words, if — upon disembarking at LAX — travelers really were besieged by crazed seniors intent on sinking dentures into their necks, then tourists who had already battled against a simulated horde in a videogame would probably have an edge. But whether playing the videogames would actually make these tourists more likely to pick a fight with "Matlock" junkies is a well-worn and ultimately circular argument. After all, the point of war-games is always twofold: to prepare soldiers to confidently tackle deadly situations, but also to remind them that all the Rambo stuff that works in action movies is really a bad, bad idea.

Instead of training for bloodthirsty combat, Steen envisions that travelers to L.A. might more likely use virtual cities to do things like tweak their sightseeing itinerary or pick a place for dinner with their Uncle Phil. Such a feat might eventually be possible, technically at least. At this very moment, there are literally thousands of game designers working in Los Angeles (see sidebar) vying to make their next videogame version of L.A. even more detailed and believable than the one they actually live in. "A danger, of course," Steen says, "might be that people will be satisfied with experiencing only the virtual city — and not bother with making a real trip at all."

There is a science-fiction film (one of our new governor elect's gems) called "Total Recall," in which citizens, rather than taking vacations, simply have fabricated memories of fictional tours implanted in their minds. That the film's title was borrowed more than a decade later as a tagline for one of the most bizarre political campaigns in U.S. history had more to do with its catchiness than the film's cultural significance. But, ironically, the election itself serves as evidence of why such a doppelganger reality will likely never arise. And that's because Los Angeles just keeps writing its own stories, different each day, unexpected and customized for each and every person who makes this town their home. And even the strangest city that we could imagine will never be as weird or rewarding as the real thing.